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Comments on OSI Article "Recent Observations on the Status
of Soviet Genetic Research"

This article argues that "the much publicized recent rise in the political and popular prestige of Lysenko" has had no effect upon Soviet genetic research "at the basic research level". However, we believe that considerable changes in Soviet research are being contemplated and possibly even implemented at present and that these changes are related to Lysenko's rise in prestige and influence.

Khrushchev in his speech at the December 1958 Plenum of the Central Committee, CPSU referred to Lysenko's works on biology and described him, among others, as a scientist who has closely bound his work to practice. He also criticized the biology faculty staff of Moscow State University. Further, in discussing the work of scientists in general, Khrushchev said that "under this (the current) system some scientists feel like free Cosmacks as it were whether or not they make proposals useful to production, the budget is the same. We must consider the possibility of making the salary of staffs of research institutes ----- somehow dependent on the results of the introduction of scientific achievements into production." Later, in June 1959, at another meeting of the Central Committee, Khrushchev again advocated this type of change in the Soviet research system and criticized the work of scientific organizations.

It is perhaps significant that Lysenko is involved in the current debate over the reorganization of the Academy of Sciences. At the December plenum of the Central Committee Lysenko spoke critically of some journals and the leadership of the Academy of Sciences. Academician N. N. Sennov later proposed a drastic reorganization of the Academy of Sciences, while lavishly praising Khrushchev's ideas on science. Sennov argued for the merging of the Departments of Physico-Mathematical Sciences, Chemical Sciences, and Biological Sciences into a new Department of Experimental Sciences. In the 11 September Izvestia, G. Frank, a colleague of Lysenko in the Department of Biological Science supported Sennov's suggestion and directly attacked Bardin, a critic of the proposed reorganization.

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During the time that these overall changes in the Soviet research system have been under consideration, specific changes have taken place which probably have affected Soviet biological research. The editorial board of the Soviet Botanical Journal which Lysenko criticized was dismissed in January 1959 and was replaced by a board of "real followers of Michurin science". The ability of this board to criticize and condemn the work of Scientists who do not follow the "Michurin science" almost certainly will restrict the freedom of Soviet biologists in their fundamental research. Also, Lysenko criticized the Biological Department of the Academy of Sciences in December 1958 and in January 1959, according to a New York Times article on 21 January 1959, it was reported that "Measures have been taken to improve the activities of the department."